

Devotion to the Mother of God

VERY REV. PRIOR HOGAN, O.P.

Reprinted from the Melbourne "Tribune"

ONE of the stock objections made by a certain class of Protestants against the Catholic Church, which claims to be the only true Church, therefore divine, is the devotion of her children to the Blessed Virgin, a devotion which the Catholic Church inculcates and fosters. Protestants of this class who have any pretensions to culture speak of Catholic devotion to Our Lady as "Mariolatry": their less refined brethren call it "Worship of the Virgin." Both terms mean the same thing, and the same arguments against this devotion are used by the literary and the illiterate.

We are told in the first place that there is absolutely no warrant in the Scriptures for such devotion; that it is nothing else than a thinly disguised Pagan cult, and that we Catholics ought to be ashamed of ourselves for our most un-Scriptural attitude and for our indulgence in Pagan practices.

Well, we are not ashamed of ourselves. On the contrary, we are proud of our devotion to the Blessed Virgin. We wear her livery gladly. What Catholic does not wear the Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel? We hail her in our prayers many times a day: What Catholic does not say the Rosary? We rely upon Our Lady; trust in her; turn to her in our hours of difficulty, of sorrow and of repentance. We address her in our prayers and petitions as our Queen, but we speak familiarly to her as our Mother, and we hope with a confidence that will not be shaken, that this homage and devotion of ours will win for us the protection of Our Lady during our life, and her gracious and powerful assistance "at the hour of our death."

We are either right or wrong in honoring the Blessed Virgin. It will be my endeavor to show you that we are supremely right, supremely logical, and supremely wise in honoring her "whom God hath first honored."

OUR LADY "BLESSSED AMONG WOMEN"

And first let me say that, though we are accused of being un-Scriptural, we have sufficient reverence for the Sacred Scriptures to call Our Lady by the title given her in the Scriptures—the title of “Blessed.” I do not see how those who stand by “the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible” can call her simply “the Virgin,” when the Bible tells us she is “blessed amongst women.” That title was given to Our Lady by command of God when Gabriel announced the Incarnation. We Catholics are satisfied to speak of her in the same terms, and to call her the Blessed Virgin since God had singled her out as “blessed among women.”

It is abundantly clear from this very fact that the Blessed Virgin is no ordinary woman. How any person who believes in Jesus Christ and acknowledges Him to be what He claimed to be, God, can yet look upon His Mother as an ordinary woman is a puzzle.

Jesus Christ is God, essentially and by nature. He is “from of old and before the world was made,” Almighty, Eternal, and He never ceased to be what He always was, is, and shall be, God. But at a certain definite moment in the history of this world, God took to Himself our human nature, and became “bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh” in the Incarnation.

The Incarnation was wrought by the power of the Holy Ghost—for the Son of God made Man had no human father. But the Incarnation was wrought in the bosom of a human Mother—and the only link that bound “the Word made flesh” to the human race was the Mother in whose womb He was conceived.

THE CROWN OF DIVINE MOTHERHOOD

There is only one Jesus Christ: Mary of Nazareth is His Mother. No child can ever disown the mother who bore him. From the moment a child is conceived he takes on a relationship to his mother which can never be broken. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is also the Son of Mary of Nazareth, and no power on earth or in hell, not even the Almighty power of God, can destroy that relationship, or pluck from the Virgin brow of Our Lady the Crown of Divine Motherhood which was placed

thereon by God Himself. The Christ is Mary's Son for ever!

And because Our Lord is what He is—God Incarnate; and because Mary of Nazareth is His Mother, she is incomparably nobler and immeasurably greater than any ordinary woman. The Blessed Virgin stands alone.

If King Copheuta weds a beggar-maid, she becomes the first lady in the land, and all others must acknowledge her as their sovereign because of the King's choice. When God chose one woman to be the Mother of His Son when His Son became Man, this woman, by the fact of God's choice, was raised to a unique position.

It is natural that we show honor and pay homage to those who by their innate goodness, their position and dignity are worthy of our homage. Hence we apply to Our Lady the words of the Book of Esther; "What shall be done to the man whom the King hath a mind to honor? Let him be clothed with the King's purple, and let the royal diadem be placed upon his head, and let the first of the King's princes and nobles go before him and say, 'Thus shall be he honored whom the King hath a mind to honor.'"

Now, keep before you this truth: The purpose of Our Lady's existence, nay, of her creation by God, was the Divine Motherhood. She was to bear the closest relationship to God Incarnate that it is possible for any being to bear towards another, that of Mother. God is Absolute sanctity and perfection, the angels are not pure in His sight. What should the purity, holiness and perfection of His Mother be who was to conceive Him, nurture Him, tend him? If her Son became man to destroy the power of Satan, would it be fitting that His Mother should ever be, even for one fleeting moment, under Satan's heel? Was it not foretold by the Eternal that Satan should be crushed beneath the heel of "The woman" of the Promise? and is not this woman the Mother of the Redeemer? Therefore, let her "be clothed in the King's purple." Let the fulness of God's preventing grace encompass her soul and in view of the merits of her Son preserve it from every vestige of sin, that sin which has stained the soul of every other human being. Let the waves of sin, which have engulfed every other soul, roll back and rise

as a wall on the right side and on the left that a stainless way be made for one creature along which she may pass unsullied and unscathed through this vale of tears. Her Son Who is to save mankind will yet be His Mother's Saviour, but in a manner different from all others. Their sin, inherited from their first parents, will be washed away through the merits of Jesus Christ. But the merits of Mary's Son will forestall the existence of His Mother and prevent this sin from tainting her soul. Let her be Immaculate then, utterly sinless from the first instant of her conception, so that in beholding her He has chosen from Eternity to be His Mother, God may say: "The law that is made for all others is not made for thee. Thou art all fair and there is neither spot nor stain in thee."

"HAIL! FULL OF GRACE!"

This Grace is but the beginning. "Let her be clothed in the King's purple," for the King will be her Son, and He is God. Therefore, let Him shower upon her every grace and perfection which He can bestow and which she, a woman, can receive, for no perfection can be too great, no grace can be too marvellous for her who has been chosen by God to be His Mother. This accumulation of grace and perfection was simply God's preparation, the effect of His love. God loved no creature so intensely as He loved His Mother, and His choice of her to be His Mother is the proof of His Omnipotent love. Love pours itself out upon the beloved. It cannot do too much. What God's love did for Our Lady may be faintly surmised when the fulness of time had come, and God's decrees were to be realised, and His messenger addressed Mary of Nazareth in the words: "Hail! Full of Grace!"

THE MOTHER OF CHRIST

Our Lady was so "full of grace" in that hour of her life that she was "blessed among women," blessed because chosen by God; blessed because prepared by Him for the position that she had been created to fill and which now awaited her acceptance. She was quite free to accept or refuse for she was a rational being, endowed like every other rational being with a free will, a will more fully free and an intelligence more perfect than the will and

intelligence of any other creature of God because she was Immaculate. But her fulness of grace then did not preclude progress in plentitude. Her fulness of grace at this moment, as St. Thomas tells us, was a "disposing fulness by which she was made worthy to be the Mother of Christ." When Our Lady freely consented to be the Mother of God and spoke her "Fiat" which is akin to the "Fiat" of God Himself: When at her words, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to His Word," and "the Word was made Flesh" and dwelt in all the fulness of His divinity and perfection of His humanity in His Mother's bosom, what was the dignity, the perfection and holiness of Our Lady then? St. Thomas tells us in a sentence pregnant with truth: "When the Blessed Virgin became the actual Mother of God she was confirmed or established in grace." Heaven had already begun for her on earth, and the unalterable attitude of the Blessed in the Kingdom of Glory towards God was the attitude of His Mother. She "possessed Him Whom her soul loved" and could not lose Him.

Now, if sanctity means union with God by charity, what must have been the sanctity of Our Lady when God was so intimately united to her, His Mother, the only human being who co-operated with the Holy Ghost in the Incarnation; the only human being who "by the power of God" fashioned the human body in which Christ appeared on earth, from which "virtue went out and healed all," through which graces and gifts were bestowed and are bestowed upon the children of men? "No one cometh to the Father but by Me," said Our Lord. It is "the man Christ Jesus," whom St. Paul continually reminds us is the one Mediator. It is the Christ who is "the Way, the Truth and the Life" for all mankind—and it is His Mother, the Virgin of Nazareth, who gave Him to men. "Holiness becometh Thy house, O Lord," exclaimed the inspired writer. What tongue can speak of the holiness of this Ark of the Covenant, this House of Gold, this living Tabernacle of God Incarnate, His Mother? "What more can I say, my Queen," asks the Saxon writer Eadmer, "for the greatness of thy grace and glory is such that human tongue is powerless to describe it."—"De Excell. Virg." C. 8.)

FULNESS AND ABSOLUTENESS OF PERFECTION

Furthermore, every human being who is in the state of grace, therefore in union with God, can merit still greater grace because of the supernatural character of the actions freely performed under the influence of grace. The conditions of merit are, the grace one possesses, and the freedom with which one performs a morally good act. The Blessed Virgin was "full of grace," and, as I have said, she enjoyed a freedom of action no other creature enjoyed because, being Immaculate, there were no obstacles such as sin, ignorance, weakness of will, or concupisence to paralyse her freedom. Every action she performed was, in consequence, a meritorious action which won for her still greater grace, still closer union with God. If at the moment of her Immaculate Conception, the "foundations of Mary's Sanctity were upon the holy mountains," that is, that her holiness in the first instant of her existence was greater than the sanctity of saints and angels; and if from that instant Our Lady began to merit further grace and became, in consequence, holier each moment of her life, who can gauge what her sanctity was when the last moment of her life on earth had come. No human intelligence can do so, no human tongue can describe it, for "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive" the fulness and absoluteness of the perfection of the Mother of God. He alone Who made His Mother the marvel of perfection she is, can tell what heights of sanctity she obtained.

THE SECOND EVE

For let it be remembered that the Blessed Virgin was no mere casual instrument in the Mystery of the Incarnation, to be used for a time, then set aside. Neither did the purpose of her existence cease when she "had brought forth her first-born Son and laid Him in a Manger." She had from eternity a purpose to fulfil until the number of the elect is complete. "Those whom God foreknew, them also He predestinated to be made conformable to the image of His Son." The royal road to eternal life, is, as St. Augustine says: *Per Christum hominem ad Christum Deum*—Through the Man Christ, to Christ the Son of

God. It is "The Word made flesh" Who has redeemed mankind, and every human being that is redeemed by Our Lord must "be made conformable to Him" Who was "conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary." It is Our Lady's work until the end of time to fashion those "whom God foreknew" to a resemblance of her Divine Son, and be the Mother of the redeemed because she is Mother of the Redeemer. The Blessed Virgin co-operated with her Divine Son in the Redemption of the human race, and she is the Mother of mankind, Mother of all for whom her Son became Man, lived, suffered and died, whether they accept or reject her, whether they recognise her position or refuse to acknowledge her as their Mother.

There is only one Saviour, and "by His bruises" alone "we are healed." Jesus Christ is the sole Mediator for us with His Eternal Father, He is the One Redeemer. But His infinite mediation does not exclude the finite mediation of His Mother, neither does His essential Redemption exclude the co-operative redemption of His Mother. The very fact of God's choice of the Blessed Virgin to be His Mother shows that He willed that she should be associated with Him in the work of Redemption.

Let us grasp as firmly as we can the truth that in the Promise made to our first parents, "the woman" and "her seed" are placed in direct antithesis to them, and were to repair the ruin wrought by them. Adam had forfeited his position as head of the human race, and Eve had lost all right to be and to be regarded as "mother of all the living" because of their disobedience to the command of God. Adam and Eve, conjointly, a man and a woman, had brought destruction upon their race. In God's Promise made to them a man and a woman were to repair this ruin. It was not any man and any woman, but a certain definite man and woman—The Woman and her seed.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE FATHERS

St. Paul insistently speaks of Our Blessed Lord as "the second Adam." The Fathers of the Church are unanimous in calling the Blessed Virgin the Second Eve. Our Lord as the Second Adam would be the True Head of the human race; the Blessed Virgin as the Second Eve

would be the true "Mother of all the living." Jesus Christ is "the seed of the woman" of the Promise, Mary's Son, hers alone, as no other son is the son of his mother, because Jesus Christ "was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary." As Eve had co-operated with Adam in bringing death and destruction into the world, so would Mary co-operate with Jesus Christ in bringing life and redemption to men. "Eve was the instrument of seduction," says St. Bernard, "Mary was the instrument of reconciliation. Eve suggested revolt, but Mary brought redemption."

As I have stated before, at the time when the announcement was made to the Blessed Virgin "that the Holy Ghost should come upon her, and the power of the Most High should overshadow her, wherefore He that should be born of her should be called the Son of God," she was absolutely free to accept the Divine Maternity or refuse it. Her consent was a necessary condition to the Incarnation, therefore, to our redemption, since "the Word was made Flesh" "for us and for our salvation." In consenting to accept the office and position of Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin *permitted*—the term is exact—the Incarnation of the Word, and thus co-operated with Almighty God in redeeming the human race.

THE BLESSED VIRGIN'S CONSCIOUS CO-OPERATION

There are certain persons who teach that the Blessed Virgin is in the same category as the Patriarchs and other ancestors of Our Lord, since they also co-operated in the Incarnation: consequently, as Abraham, Jacob, David cannot be considered co-redeemers of mankind, neither can she be so regarded. It is quite true that these forerunners of Jesus Christ, these Patriarchs and others *did* co-operate in the Incarnation and Redemption, because they were the ancestors of Our Lady and her Son, but there is no parity between their co-operation and hers. They were merely the unknowing instruments by means of which God carried out His Divine plans, but Our Lady co-operated consciously, and with complete knowledge and freedom in those plans. They knew, because of promise and prophecy, that the Deliverer of His people would spring from their race, tribe, family, but they did

not know how or when or by whom. But Our Blessed Lady knew from the Angel's message, and knew with absolute certainty, that the Deliverer should be born of her, would be her Son, that He was the Eternal Son of God, God the Mighty, and that in Him promise and prophecy was fulfilled. She knew that because He was this, He would undo the evil Adam had done, break the power of Satan, redeem the human race, and, by offering Himself willingly as a Victim, make atonement to His Father for the sins of men and open to them the gates of eternal life. She knew that it was as God made Man, He would accomplish these things; that she was "the woman" chosen by God to minister to Him the human nature necessary for the accomplishment of these things; that if she consented to become the Mother of Him Who was to redeem mankind, she would share not only in His glory but also in His sufferings and shame, be intimately associated with Him in the work of Redemption, and become His co-helper; and that it depended upon her free consent whether the Mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption should or should not be fulfilled. The Blessed Virgin knew all this—and then replied: "Behold the hand-maid of the Lord, be it done to me according to His Word. And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us." The work of Redemption had begun, and Mary of Nazareth, as Mother of God, had her part in the work. How inseparably united were Mother and Son we learn from the words of Simeon. The Child "was set for the rise and fall of many in Israel and for a sign which should be contradicted." The Mother's "soul a sword should pierce that the thoughts of many hearts might be revealed."

This contradiction of Our Lord culminated on the Cross: "and by the Cross of Jesus stood His Mother." The sword had pierced the Mother's soul through and through. The sacrifice accepted willingly at the moment of the Incarnation was nearing its consummation. "Each offered to God the same sacrifice," says Arnold the Carthusian, "the One in His heart's blood, the other in her anguish of soul."

Now, in becoming Mother of the Son of Man, the Blessed Virgin took on a relationship to mankind, a

spiritual relationship. This relationship was confirmed by Our Lord on the Hill of Sacrifice. In His hour of dying Our Lord said to His Mother: "Woman, behold thy son," and addressing St. John He said: "Son, behold thy Mother." These words were not symbolical only but effective. They bore witness to a spiritual childbirth that was universal in that all who were redeemed by Jesus Christ became sons of God, brethren of Jesus Christ, children of Mary. The Motherhood of Mary was made commensurate with the redemptive efficacy of the sacrifice of her Divine Son, and she was to exercise her power and influence as our Mother by watching over us, interceding for us, and by becoming the Almoner of His grace. The Catholic Church has from the beginning accepted this position of Our Blessed Lady, and has besought her throughout the ages to "show herself a Mother" by her intercession for us, and "prays that Jesus Christ, the One, Perfect, and only Mediator before His Eternal Father, will grant our petitions when they are presented to Him by His Mother."

In accepting this position of the Blessed Virgin as Mother of mankind and in adopting this attitude towards her, the Church obeys a perfectly natural instinct. Can a son refuse his mother's request? If we are the brethren of Jesus Christ, can He refuse the request of His Mother on our behalf? "What is thy petition . . . that it may be granted to thee," said the King to Esther, "And what wilt thou have done? although thou ask the half of my Kingdom, thou shalt have it." Then she answered: "If I have found favor in thy sight, O King . . . give me . . . my people for which I request. But he, as the manner was, held out the golden sceptre with his hand, which was a sign of clemency." (Esther: vii, 2-3; viii, 4.)

GREAT AND FAR-REACHING INTERCERSORY POWER

Now, the more intense the charity, the more intimate the union with God as an effect of this divine virtue, the more powerful will be the intercession. Hence, in all her prayers the Church appeals to God "through Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." His Charity was infinite, and His Union was a hypostatic union, a union that was His alone. But after the Man Christ Jesus no one loved God

so intensely or was united to Him so intimately as His Mother. Her Charity is only surpassed by the infinite love of God Himself; her union with God by grace and charity was incomparably greater than that of any other creature; and her Divine Maternity, by still further uniting her with God, has endowed her with a power greater than that wielded by God's angels and saints. (Lepicier, "De Beatissima Virgine Maria," pp. 404-405.)

How great and far-reaching then, must be her intercessory power. Love is importunate. It refuses to accept refusal, and a Mother's love is the most importunate of all. Just because the Blessed Virgin loved God "Who so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son" to redeem it: just because she loved God's Son who was also her Son as no other loved Him, and He died for all men and thus gave the supreme proof of His love for them; and just because this only Son of God and only Son of Mary Immaculate gave the race of man into her keeping to be mothered by her, is her pleading for us irresistible. It is God's will that all men shall be saved, and that His Kingdom shall be established in each human soul. Sanctity means conformity with the Will of God: could the Blessed Virgin desire anything more eagerly than that God's Will should be accomplished? Would she be in the full meaning of the term—idonea—a worthy Mother of God if she did not will what He willed, and, in her own way, according to the power that grace conferred upon her, strive by her Mother's prayers and pleading for the salvation of each human being, so that the Incarnation might not be in vain or the Sacrifice of the Cross of no account for even one soul?

She does intercede for us as a Mother, and her intercession is so efficacious that Blessed Albert the Great calls her "the Universal Almoner of all good," and his disciple, St. Thomas of Aquino, teaches that "we may obtain salvation from this glorious Virgin in every danger . . . have her assistance in every act of virtue, for in her 'is all grace of the way and of truth.'" (*Expositio super salut: Angelicam.*)

MOTHER OF GOD AND MOTHER OF MEN

A Doctor of the Church who is also a canonised Saint,

that is, a man who was remarkable for his learning and a hero in holiness, St. Alphonsus Liguori, teaches in express terms that all graces without exception are conferred upon us by God through His Blessed Mother. The Jesuit theologians, Suarez and Vega, the Dominican theologians, Contenson and Justin of Mieckow, teach the same. St Alphonsus gives as a reason for this doctrine the following argument:

Mediation of justice of merit is one thing, and mediation of Grace by prayer is another. And again, it is one thing to say that God cannot, and another that He will not grant graces without the intercession of Mary. . . . We most readily admit that Jesus Christ is the only Mediator of Justice . . . and that by His merits He obtains us all graces and salvation; but we may say that Mary is the Mediator of Grace; and that receiving all she obtains through Jesus Christ, and because she prays and asks for it in the name of Jesus Christ, yet, all the same, whatever graces we receive they come to us through her intercession."—"Glories of Mary," Part I., c. v.

If the greatest grace that God bestowed upon mankind was granted through the Blessed Virgin and dependently upon her free consent, we may reasonably conclude that all other graces will be given to us through her intercession. And it is very significant that when the Gospels record the solemn communication of Grace by Our Blessed Lord to men, we find His Mother associated with Him on each occasion, and the means used by Him to communicate these graces. At the sound of her voice the unborn Baptist "leaped" in his Mother's womb and was sanctified. The Shepherds and Kings "found the Child and His Mother" and believed. The faith of Our Lord's Apostles was established in Him, when, at the Marriage Feast of Cana He wrought His first miracle at the unspoken request of His Mother, though His "time was not yet come." On Calvary Our Lord gave His Mother to us to be our Mother, and that her position as Mother of men, their intercessor with her Son, was recognised and acknowledged from the beginning may be inferred from the fact that, when the Apostles "went up to the upper chamber" in that house near Jerusalem, there to await the fulfilment of their Master's Promise and the coming of the Holy Ghost, "they were persevering with one mind in prayer, with the women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus." (Acts i., 13-14.)

She was Mother of the infant Church because she was Mother of the Infant Christ, Mother of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ because she ministered unto Him, His human body. As she nourished, and tended and safeguarded her Divine Son, so was she to nourish, tend and safeguard those spiritual children of hers until they would arrive "unto the measure of the age of the fulness of Christ." (Ephesians iv., 13.)

Hence it is that Cardinal Newman wrote:

I consider it impossible for those who believe the Church to be one vast body in heaven and on earth, in which every holy creature of God has his place, and of which prayer is the life, when once they recognise the sanctity and dignity of the Blessed Virgin, not to perceive immediately, that her office above is one of perpetual intercession for the faithful militant, and that our very relation to her must be that of clients to a patron; and that, in the eternal enmity which exists between the woman and the serpent, while the Serpent's strength lies in being the Tempter, the weapon of the Second Eve and Mother of God is prayer.—"A letter to Dr. Pusey," n. 3.

THE HANDMAID OF GOD

It is for these reasons, which I have merely touched upon and very imperfectly, that we pray to God's Mother, trust in her, love her, and ask her "to pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death." We Catholics do not exalt the Mother above her Son, nor give her the honor, praise, glory and worship that we give to Him. We do not say that the Blessed Virgin is a goddess, and so we do not fall into the errors of paganism, neither do we say that she is what she is, independently of God and His grace. We do say with Our Lady herself that she is "the Handmaid of God"; that He who alone is mighty hath done great things to her; that He chose her from eternity to be His Mother, and in choosing her, prepared her; and that this preparation implied a fulness of grace, and perfection which so ennobled her that it rendered her "worthy" to be the Mother of God.

The Gospels speak but little of her it is true, yet, blazoned on their pages is this incontrovertible fact—The Virgin of Nazareth is Mother of God! No further title to greatness is required, no further mention of her was needed, this fact establishes her as "blessed . . . above all women upon the earth." (Judith xiii., 23.)

It is quite true that in the Gospels obscurity is the

dominant feature in the external life of the Blessed Virgin. But no shade is deep enough to hide her completely, or allow men to forget her. Even in their enthusiasm for Our Lord they proclaimed that "the womb that bore Him was blessed." And Our Lady herself foretold to what this obscurity would give place in God's own time; to her exaltation; and the praise, thanks, gratitude and homage of all men for all time. "All generations shall call me blessed," she exclaimed in her Magnificat, "because He hath regarded the humility of His Handmaid."

Once more permit me to remind you that the test of fitness for the Kingdom of heaven is conformity "to the image" of Jesus Christ: "Those whom God foreknew, them also He predestinated to be made conformable to the image of His Son." God foreknew the Blessed Virgin from eternity. She, therefore, before all others, was "predestinated to be made conformable to the image" of the Son of God whom she was to bear. It is of this Son of God that St. Paul writes: "He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross. Wherefore God hath exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above all names." Our Lord "came unto His own, and His own received Him not." He did not come up to their expectations; they only knew Him for the Son of a carpenter, and that Mary was His Mother. It was only by degrees that Our Lord came into His own, and took "the Gentiles for His inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for His possession."

So with His Mother. She was like to her Son in the lowliness and obscurity of her life, but the day would surely come when she would come into her own, and to be hailed as "blessed among women" by every tongue that proclaimed Her Son to be the Christ the Son of God.

How the Centuries Have Loved Our Lady

FR. CUTHBERT, O.S.F.C.

Reprinted from "Columbia."

WHEN the Council of Ephesus sent forth its definitive declaration that Mary was truly to be called Mother of God inasmuch as her Son was God, a cry of joy arose throughout all the East and reverberated in the West. Out of that struggle for Mary's honor came forth that glorious Marian literature, instinct with purest poetry, which is one of the finest products of Eastern Catholicism. The preachers preached and the poets sang the glories of Mary: the populace took up the preachers' words and sang the poets' songs. Everywhere Mary was proclaimed "the spotless one," "the gate of our salvation," "the rose that fadeth not," "the Tabernacle of God," "the advocate of all under heaven," "the glory and foundation of the Church." In every home and church her picture was set up for veneration. Thus had the eastern heresies set the East ablaze with a fervent clamor of devotion which even the great schism could not quench. In the calmer West, further removed as it was from the passionate atmosphere engendered by the controversies, the enthusiasm created by the irradiation of our Lady's prerogatives entered deeply though with more restraint into the people's life: Churches were dedicated in her name; feasts established in her honor. Less exuberant, yet with perhaps a deeper resonance, the Western Fathers set forth the claims of Mary on the Christian's devotion; proclaimed her as the exemplar of all Christian virtues, and enshrined in the liturgical hymns the great truths of our Lady's unique virginity and exalted Motherhood.

But whilst in the East devotion to our Lady after its first splendid outburst remained as a stationary quality, taking on no new developments (probably due to the sterilizing influence of the great schism), in the West one may trace a continuous royal progress. To the dignified Roman reticence of the earlier Patristic period succeeded the more childlike spontaneity, the more simple human feeling

of the Middle Ages. The medieval spirit loved our Lady as a child loves its mother, and adorned her with the adoration of the knight of chivalry for the ideal lady set far above the reach of earthly passion. Yet remember our Lady was not (as some have said) a mere ideal figure: she was *the* woman of the Gospel, realized vividly in the understanding and vision of their Christian faith: the Mother and Queen of the family of God. It was not an idealization but a realization of the Virgin-Mother of the Divine Redeemer which inspired the medieval spirit and evoked its tenderest loyalty and chivalrous devotion. Medieval devotion like medieval life was too palpitant for great reticences: it had in it the spirit of eager, generous youth. It knew not how to veil its emotions but must express itself so that its outward life might declare its inmost feelings and desires. Hence in its childlike love and chivalric veneration for our Lady, the medieval world would cover the earth with tokens of its love. It not only multiplied churches bearing her name, it set up its wayside shrines and chantries; it lit its lamps and candles before her image; it rang its bells to call forth the evening *Ave*. When it built schools it put her statue above the entrance gateway and made the scholars doff their caps as they approached. It made men vow that any request made to them in the name of Mary should not be refused. It banded men together in confraternities or religious orders, dedicated to the service of Mary or marching under her banner and protection. Men not only gave her name to their children, but even to the herbs and flowers. All these were but the lesser courtesies they paid to her whom they acknowledged their sovereign Lady. Behind the courtesies was the loyal service of mind and heart and body. We do not say that all who rendered the courtesies were equally diligent to render the most substantial service: had that been so the Middle Ages would have been the ages of saints: whereas they were ages in which saints jostled with great sinners and rubbed shoulders with a multitude who were neither saints nor great sinners. Nevertheless it is true that the Middle Ages did give loyal service to their sovereign Queen. One service which the medieval spirit did to her was a yet fuller realization of the Virgin-Mother as the exemplar of

Christian womanhood. To the medieval mind Mary was *the* woman; and the vision of her womanhood perfected in holiness cast a halo around all womanhood.

It was a vision that many gazed upon from afar and lost in the tumult of earthly passion, nevertheless it was a vision that did much to secure the sanctity of domestic life and to purify a world in which the baser passions for long centuries had run riot. Not only did this vision bring about a renewed enthusiasm for the dedicated life of Christian virginity; but it invested marital relations with a renewed reverence and gave to the home a renewed sanctity. To the medieval Catholic Bethlehem and Nazareth set forth a lesson to be carried into every home. That was one of the loyal services of medieval devotion. Another was the service of pity and compassion for the afflicted which men rendered to her whom they looked upon as compassionate Mother of suffering mankind. In her honor they banded together to redeem captives from slavery, to tend the sick and relieve the poor and what that meant for a suffering world those can tell who know the horrors of misery which were the lot of the weak and helpless in the disorganized social conditions of the earlier Middle Ages.

These were two of the great services which medieval devotion rendered to our Lady for the building up of the Kingdom of her Divine Son on earth. Yet another service medieval devotion gave her, as became the chivalric spirit which permeated all that was best in medieval life. Chivalry not only demanded deeds of service; it demanded that these deeds be given in the spirit of song. Blithely or sadly, as the occasion dictated, would the medieval spirit sing of its love as it did its deeds of love: for it was impelled by vision and the heart's eager desire. And so whilst it set its will to the doing of deeds for the love of our Lady, the medieval spirit kept its eyes fixed on the vision of her adorable perfection, drank in the beauty of holiness it saw and gave out to the world its paean of praise. With an exquisite emotion the preachers proclaimed our Lady's virtues from the pulpit; with eager speculation the schoolmen descended on her unique prerogatives; with a loving adoration the populace gazed upon her as she was brought before them in the dramatic

representations of the Nativity and Passion; whilst all Europe reverberated with the carol and lyric to the praise of Mary. And not only did this love of our Lady infuse a new life into the song of the singer; it gave new inspiration to the art of the painter. In the revival of art, after long centuries of decline, Mary reigned as Queen.

The Middle Ages passed away in an arresting spectacle of gorgeous color and dark shadow. The New Humanism which presaged the coming of a new age, had lost the inspiring simplicity of the medieval mind, and lost, too, the spiritual vision which had transformed the medieval world. Yet even so it could not banish the remembrance of Mary; and it was in the Madonna that the painters still found their most popular subject. The Renaissance world still sang the praises of Mary, though it had largely ceased to pay her the more devout service. Renaissance princes, whilst shamelessly offending her purity and pity in practical life, would build sanctuaries in her honor and adorn them with the costliest gifts hoping thereby to win God's mercy at the end. In the lowliest places there still lingered on, untouched by the New Humanism, much of the true devotion fostered by the earlier time; and even amongst the scholars, not infrequently, a genuine devotion to Mary mingled with the New Learning. Was it not some scholar, well-versed in Scripture, who gave the Litany of our Lady which since has been a household treasure in every Catholic home? It was not until Protestantism reared its forbidding pride against Catholic tradition that the veneration of Mary was first banned and then forgotten wherever the Protestant heresies blasted the earth with chill breath: and for the first time in Christian history, Mary was forgotten amongst large bodies who professed the Christian name.

Then the name of Mary became at once a symbol of defense and a confession of faith amongst her Catholic children. When Pius V. sent forth the Christian fleet to do battle with the Turk under the protection of the Queen of Heaven, his action was symbolical of the Catholic turning towards our Lady in the greater battle against the forces of heresy which was to be the lot of the Church for centuries to come. Now it was that the Catholic spirit looked to Mary not for her blessing on the arts of peace, but

for her protection in the atmosphere of war. They remembered how in times past the invocation of Mary had been a defense against danger; how St. Dominic had stemmed the tide of heresy in his day by teaching the people to recite the *Ave*. And so now devotion to our Lady became again one of the defenses of the Faith against the heresies and schisms which threatened to engulf it. So there arose Sodalities and confraternities of our Lady designed to protect the Faith and foster the Catholic piety of the young: feasts in honor of our Lady were multiplied; the people gathered together in the churches for the evening salutation of our Lady which later on developed into or gave place to our modern Benediction. To the liturgical *Ave Maria* men now added the invocation: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners"—feeling as they did the dire need of her prayers. And more and more as the warfare raged between the true Faith and the false, the Catholic people placed themselves the more persistently under the protection of her, "the help of Christians." And all this while in the stress of the battle a new glory of Mary—new and yet as old as the Church—was emerging out of the shadows into the clear light of the people's consciousness: the glorious truth of her Immaculate Conception. Long taught in undefined language—had not the Eastern Fathers declared her "the spotless one," "the lily without stain"? had not the Church in all ages declared her to possess "the fullness of grace"?—yet not always clearly understood and sometimes doubted, the glories of our Lady's Immaculate Conception now drew to itself a declared allegiance and more and more insistently the Catholic people began to proclaim anew their faith in this unique grace given by God to Mary to fit her to become the Mother of the Divine Son.

To Catholic Spain must be given the credit of bringing this devotion out of the cloisters into the streets where in greeting each other the people would proclaim their faith with the salutation: "*Ave Maria purissima!*" Soon the devotion spread throughout all Catholic lands and amongst all Catholic peoples. The heretics blasphemed; the Catholics only the more loudly proclaimed that Mary was conceived immaculate; until in the face of the heretics

who denounced the matriolating of the Catholic Church, Pius IX. at length defined the dogma and once and for all silenced the doubters who stood within the pale of the Church. What the definition of our Lady's title to be "Mother of God" had been to the Catholics of the fifth century, the definition of the Immaculate Conception was to the Catholics of the nineteenth century—a triumph of their faith, a victory of their love. And at that moment it was that Mary reappeared for a fleeting while upon the earth, symbolizing her healing presence in a world rent by disbelief and lack of charity: appearing to a peasant maid in that Pyrenean village of Lourdes. "What is your name?" asked the maid. "I am the Immaculate Conception," was the answer. And from that time our Lady of Lourdes has been the great healer of men's souls and bodies to peoples from all parts of the world. There at the Grotto of Lourdes all tongues proclaim the glory of Mary Immaculate; and in all their home lands those same tongues repeat her praise.

Thus throughout the centuries have Catholic generations called Mary blessed nor ceased to add praise to praise to the glory of her name.